

DEQ STUDYING IMPACTS OF PROPOSED POWER LINE

By Karl Puckett

Spin-off wind farms are getting a closer look as part of a new study assessing the impacts of the U.S. stretch of a proposed power transmission line between Great Falls and Lethbridge, Alberta, according to the state Department of Environmental Quality.

However, a DEQ regulator said it is difficult gathering information because the DEQ doesn't specifically regulate the wind industry.

"We're going to do the best (we can) with the information we have," the DEQ's Tom Ring said.

Alterations to the overhead transmission line's various routes, which farmers have criticized, also are being considered in the study.

The \$129 million, 230-kilovolt project is privately funded by Montana Alberta Tie Ltd. out of Calgary. It would be the first direct power transmission connection between Montana and Alberta. About 130 miles of the 203-mile route is in Montana.

U.S. Department of Energy spokeswoman Julie Ruggiero said that department, which is jointly studying the project with the state DEQ, is working "expeditiously" to prepare a draft environmental impact statement. Ring said it could be out sometime this fall.

International transmission lines require presidential permits from federal authorities and certificates from the state under the Major Facility Siting Act.

The developer originally anticipated construction would be under way by this point.

"I think it's fair to say the regulatory phase has taken longer than we anticipated," said Bob Williams, MATL's vice president of regulatory affairs. "Nevertheless, we remain committed to seeing the process through."

The purpose of the new transmission line is to enhance inter-regional imports and exports of power. Economic development officials in northcentral Montana praise the project because it could spur wind farm development.

Several wind developers have secured long- and short-term shipping rights on the line.

However, the north-south power conduit has sparked criticism from agricultural producers, who say the line would be difficult to farm around.

Conservationists also have raised concerns about the cumulative impact of the commercial wind developments.

A total of 632 comments were filed after an original draft environmental study was released in March.

Based on the issues raised in those comments, the DOE announced in June that it was launching an additional study in conjunction with the DEQ.

A number of the comments called for additional analysis of the wind farms, Ring said, "but we don't regulate them."

"We can't require wind farms to give us information," he said.

Nonetheless, regulators are asking for additional information from developers considering projects around the MATL line, he said.

In Montana, wind-farm operators need to follow permitting requirements for stormwater discharges during construction. The Major Facility Siting Act applies if at least 69 kilovolts of new electric transmission is part of the plans.

Moreover, other agencies might require permits for wind development, according to the DEQ. For example, under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the impact on birds and bats is likely to be an issue, but the DEQ doesn't issue permits specifically for wind farms.

Ring said wind developers could potentially avoid all regulation if they built on private land "on a ridgeline somewhere."

"If somebody is a bit clever, they can find locations where there are no permits required," he said.

Four transmission line routes were considered in the first environmental study.

The preferred alternative uses single poles, rather than wider H-frames, along 24 miles that cut diagonally across cropland. It also suggested that a portion of the route be moved to the edge of farm fields instead of cutting diagonally.

"There will be some new variations that came up as a result of comments," Ring said.

Williams, the MATL official, said the appreciation of the Canadian dollar has given the company additional buying power so it's able to double the number of miles of single poles diagonally crossing cropland.

Dutton-area farmer Jerry McCrae, who originally had poles crossing his land, said he's confused by what he views as a lack of progress.

McCrae is among a number of agricultural producers who are objecting to the diagonal route across farmland. The farmers are arguing that having to maneuver cumbersome farm machinery around the cross-cuts would increase their expenses.

"If this is as far as we can get in two years, the process is screwed up from my standpoint," he said.

In the 2007 session, the Montana Legislature approved property tax breaks for renewable energy developers and landowners who have new transmission lines put on their property.

Those changes will be included in the new environmental review, Ring said.